

NATIVE AMERICANS OF MERRIMACK- THEIR CHIEF PASSACONAWAY

During the 1500's, the Native peoples of our area were decimated by diseases brought by the fishermen coming ashore for fresh water and meat. Something as simple as the measles or common cold were fatal to a people never exposed to these illnesses from Europe. About 90% of the Native populations were gone long before the settlers began to arrive in the early 1600's. Those in our area: Souhegan, Nashua, Naticook and Amoskeag tribes along the Merrimack River, had too few members of their tribes to survive, so they banded together with the Penacook tribe near the present-day Concord to form a confederation. The famous Passaconaway was the head of this confederation.

Passaconaway (Child of the Bear) was born between 1555 and 1580, and he consolidated the remains of these tribes through marriages, character, magic and skill. He was a huge man, both in stature and acumen. Many tales were told of his skills as a hunter, strength and negotiator. What a politician! He was known for swimming across the Merrimack River underwater and shooting a deer with a bow and arrow when then traveled many yards after going through the deer. His "magical" prowess made water burn, trees dance, ice appear in the summer and transformed a dead snake back into life. He gather all the tribes together to assure their survival, rather than warring among themselves.

He was known as a peacemaker. He had a vision that the newcomers, who arrived in ships from the east with white sails, were coming on clouds and that they would dominate the land with their coming. Therefore he decided on a peaceful co-existence, perhaps hoping for their help with defense against the dreaded Mohawks to the west. It is though that he might have been present at the first "Thanksgiving" near Plymouth, Massachusetts. During the reign of "The Great Shaman or Sagamore" there are only two records of an Indian killing a settler: both times the chief turned over the guilty party to the white men for their form of justice. In 1629 he is recorded as signing a deed near Exeter, NH, although there is some doubt as to whether he actually signed it or whether he did not understand the meaning of a deed, giving up ownership of the land. Native peoples did not OWN land: they were given the use of the land by the creator to survive and thrive. After losing their lands to the settlers, he petitioned the Massachusetts General Court to be given land along both side of the Merrimack River for his home in old age. It was given and taken back several times, when farmers wanted the land, including two islands in the river between Merrimack and Litchfield for their sheep. "Indians givers?" It is said that John Eliot, the missionary, converted Passaconaway to Christianity, and many "Praying Villages" grew up in the "New England."

There are several legends of Passaconaway's death in around 1673, He is said to be buried near York, Maine at the top of Mt. Agamenticus. Another said he wished to meet with the other great Native chiefs in "heaven" and that he was pulled on a sled by white wolves into the heavens across Lake Winnepesaukee to the White Mountains, where he rose from Mt. Washington in flames. For such a magician, anything might be possible.

In the 1600's, the great chief spoke to his people near Lowell, MA begging them to remain in harmony with the colonists. His speech is recorded by settlers who were present, when he passed the leadership to his son, Wonalancet. His vision of the futility of opposing the newcomers had come true. By the late 1600's King Philip's War was centered in what is now Rhode Island, and created a hostile atmosphere that resulted in most of the Penacook Indians joining the Abenakis in going north into Canada. Wonalancet and his family had been captured and held until Passaconaway stepped in. Raids continued

on both sides and with much intermarriage, the culture(s) of the Native Peoples of our area were much lost to history.

In the 1980's, there began a change to bring back the recognition and knowledge of those peoples who were our first residents. There are frequent PowWows (Native gatherings) celebrating the local tribal peoples as well as those from other tribes around the country. On any weekend from May through November, you can find several PowWows within an hours' drive of your home. Our local Scouts celebrate the history of our local tribes with many of their ceremonies and participation in these PowWows. Locally we see many signs of the Native presence in the names of our rivers, lakes, mountains, towns, roads, camps and even golf courses.

Please visit the Merrimack Historical Society at our one-room schoolhouse at 520 Boston Post Road in South Merrimack. We are open on Tuesdays from noon to 8 PM.